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ABSTRACT

The Chautauqua movement is described with a focus on its influences on American higher education. As the most influential wholly American institution in the social and cultural life of rural communities, its contributions to higher education included development of correspondence and extension courses and the creation of the summer term. Chautauqua's origins were in a meeting at Lake Chautauqua (New York) in 1874 in which interested parties decided to create a vigorous private movement in popular education. The first Chautauqua lasted 2 weeks, with programs divided into 6 sections including sample Sunday School meetings and practical exhibits. Instructional courses were supplemented by inspirational lectures, concerts, and games. Emphasis was on self-improvement via Bible study and secular activities. The program grew in stages over the years. By 1898, Chautauqua relinquished the university title and abandoned its degree granting power. Within a short time, gatherings mimicking this model appeared around the country, and by 1900 there were 200 independent chautauquas. One influence on education which could easily be overlooked is related to the tent chautauquas whose mainstay was the inspirational lecture. The tent chautauqua circuit employed 6000 college students per summer for its tent crews. They earned money for tuition and served as role models for those in small towns, thereby increasing college enrollments. The circuit lasted for 50 years, and its decline was influenced by many factors (e.g., better roads and transportation, more newspapers and magazines, increased travel abroad, and the advent of radio, television, and movies). Contains six references. (SM)

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INFLUENCES OF THE CHAUTAUQUA MOVEMENT ON AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INFLUENCES OF THE CHAUTAUQUA MOVEMENT

ON AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In their chronicle of the Chautauqua movement, Victoria and Robert Case (1948) have written that "...no single wholly American institution, with the possible exception of the Model T, left a greater imprint upon the social and cultural life of the rural communities of the nation" (p.v, preface). The contributions of the chautauqua movement, however, extend beyond the social and cultural elements, reaching into the realm of American higher education.

What was the chautauqua movement? How did it arise? What factors caused its expansion? And finally, why did it end? There is general agreement regarding the genesis of the movement and the forces which shaped it. Its history is rich in intelligent, energetic men and women, many of whose names are familiar to us today.

John Heyl Vincent became a teacher at the age of 15, a local preacher by the time he was 17, a circuit rider at 19, and was appointed to his first church at the age of 21. Vincent, who was later to become a bishop, accomplished these early achievements without the benefit of a college education; but he was a firm believer in the merits of education. In 1868, while serving as secretary of the Methodist Sunday School Union, he established the Sunday School Quarterly, a publication devoted to higher standards for Sunday school teaching. Vincent felt that there should be intensive short term courses for religious teachers similar to normal institutes which existed for public school teachers.

Lewis Miller, an inventor and manufacturer from Akron, was also interested in Sunday school work. In fact, he designed and built in Akron a

Sunday school hall which was widely copied. Vincent and Miller met at a Sunday School Institute and shared their ideas. Vincent felt that the Akron Sunday School building would be an ideal site for his Normal Institute, but Miller had a different vision. He wanted to find "a place of natural beauty" (Gould, 1961, p.4) for the institute and he knew that a Methodist association owned a camp meeting site in New York which would be well suited to this venture. The concept was difficult for Vincent to embrace because he objected to camp meetings in general; but the two men visited Fair Point, New York on Lake Chautauqua in 1874 and the first Assembly was held there in August of that year, "creating the most vigorous private movement in popular education the world has ever seen" (Gould, p.3). Vincent had wanted to hold the gathering in the winter, but Miller won out with the argument that public school teachers could also attend if it were held during the summer.

The first "chautauqua" lasted two weeks. Each week's program was divided into six sections which included practical exhibits and sample Sunday school meetings. The instructional classes were supplemented with games, inspirational lectures, concerts, and even fireworks displays. The emphasis, however, was on self improvement through the study of the Bible and secular activities "...were always secondary and were considered useful because they contributed to the individual's effectiveness as a student" (Gould, 1961, p.76).

The program grew in stages. By 1884 the chautauqua lasted 15 days and by 1894 it stretched to eight weeks. In 1875 Ulysses S. Grant addressed the assembly. He was the first of seven United States presidents to visit Chautauqua. The enrollment more than doubled in each of the first two years of its existence and Hebrew and Greek were added to the curriculum. In 1878 Vincent designed a plan for a four-year program of guided reading which could be completed throughout the year. The program was called the Chautauqua

Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) and 8,400 people signed up the first year, with the Circle boasting membership of 100,000 within ten years. Two years after CLSC began, The Chautauquan was published for its members. The popularity of the circle was overwhelming; train crews as well as storekeepers and their patrons constituted circles. Thomas A. Edison and his wife, a daughter of Lewis Miller, also completed the Circle course.

In 1880 the National Education Association held its annual meeting at Chautauqua. The New York state legislature recognized the institution as Chautauqua University and granted it the right to confer degrees in 1883. It is remarkable that in less than ten years a "...project for improving the quality of teaching in Sunday schools became a university" (Gould, 1961, p.13). In 1885 a School of Language, headed by a professor of Hebrew from Yale, was added. Students enjoyed the courses of William Rainey Harper immensely and they asked to be allowed to continue their studies during the winter months. Two previous attempts to begin correspondence schools in this country, one in Boston and the other at Illinois Wesleyan University, had failed. Harper's initial attempts to create a correspondence course were not stellar, but improvement came in time.

Extension programs had been started by Professor James Stuart of Cambridge, England in 1888. While visiting England, John Vincent observed these programs and he implemented them at Chautauqua four years later. Not only did Chautauqua University offer 168 lecturers to local groups, but these systematic lecture courses included printed syllabi, class discussions, written exercises, and final examinations.

A number of changes occurred for Chautauqua at the end of the century. In 1898 Chautauqua relinquished the university title and abandoned its degree granting power. At the same time the Institute, as it was to become known, discontinued its correspondence work except as CLSC. Melvil Dewey, the father

of library science, organized the School of Library Training in 1901, just one year before New York bestowed a new charter on Chautauqua Institution. Interestingly, the New York State Department of Education still gave credit for some Chautauqua courses as late as 1926 (Noffsinger, 1926).

Many people were not able to travel to New York to participate but still wanted to share in the experience of Chautauqua. It took very little time for gatherings which mimicked this model to spring up around the country. By 1900 there were 200 independent "chautauquas" which were said to be permanent because they convened on the same site annually and they were expected to last indefinitely. Rebecca Richmond (1943) affirms that "the chautauqua movement completely incorporated the inquiring democratic spirit of the middle ranks of the American citizenry" (p.31). Morrison (1974) believed that the American people responded so readily to the movement because they felt that the knowledge explosion had dated their knowledge. Similarly, Gould (1961) felt that the movement narrowed the gap between "...the rural Midwestern population and the more advantageously situated East" (p.2).

A number of shrewd businessmen saw an opportunity to take advantage of the American interest in the movement. They established bureaus for the organization of speakers' schedules and the "tent chautauqua" was born. The lecturers who worked through the bureaus were booked on a very tight schedule in order to maximize profits. Although Chautauqua Institution lent support to the permanent and, to a lesser extent, the tent circuits, there was no true affiliation between them. In time, the quality of programming in the chautauquas which were managed by the bureaus declined. They were still considered respectable, however, because of the name which they shared with the original organization. Still, many people probably best remember the movement "for the faintly gaudy era of the tent circuits" (Gould, 1961, p.72). It's difficult to describe exactly why these were so successful; Case and Case

(1948) believed that part of the reason was intangible and one had to be caught up in the excitement of the times - in the idea that something larger than life was available right on Main Street! Americans in that era had occasion to see and hear the likes of Johann Sebastian Bach, William Jennings Bryan, Booker T. Washington, Carrie Nation, Eugene Debs, Jane Addams, James Whitcomb Riley, Edgar Bergen, and Edna Ferber.

The pioneering work of Chautauqua in the areas of correspondence and extension courses has already been mentioned. Another debt which American higher education owes to the movement is the creation of the summer term. Lewis Miller, a member of the board of trustees of Mt. Union College as well as co-founder of Chautauqua, suggested holding classes during the summer in order to give students who were farmers time to make up work they had missed while harvesting. There was also a continual exchange of teachers between major universities and Chautauqua, with many teaching at both institutions simultaneously.

Many individuals were influenced by some very creative minds at the Institution. Chautauqua was under the general supervision of John Dewey in the early 1900s, George Gershwin composed his Concerto in F there in 1925, and Duke Ellington opened the 1972 season at Chautauqua Institution.

William Rainey Harper served for a time as principal of the College of Liberal Arts at Chautauqua. In that role he sometimes filled in for Vincent in the president's absence, determining curriculum and hiring teachers. He drew upon these administrative skills later as president of the University of Chicago. Harper implemented a number of ideas at Chicago which he had seen at Chautauqua, including a university press. He even persuaded the famous coach Amos Alonzo Stagg, who had been athletic director at Chautauqua, to join him in Chicago.

According to Joseph Gould (1961), when we "...compare the organizational scheme of the University of Chicago with what had developed at Chautauqua, the similarities are far beyond the possibility of mere coincidence" (p.60). Yet Gould felt that Harper never acknowledged any debt to Chautauqua and "...the effect of the Chautauqua movement on American higher education has gone unrecognized and unrecorded" (p.72). Earlier in his work, however, Gould stated that Harper played an important role in the evolution of the Chautauqua plan and it was "...characteristic of him that he possessed the vision to recognize its possibilities in a new situation and the skill and energy needed to realize those possibilities" (p. 62). Brubacher and Rudy (1958) stated that Charles Van Hise, a president of the University of Wisconsin, had served under Harper at Chicago and was deeply impressed with "Harper's Chautauquan idea of bringing the university to all the people by extending its direct influence far beyond its own campus (p.165). Further, John Noffsinger (1926) believed that upon becoming president of the University of Chicago, Harper established a correspondence division of the department of extension as a direct result of his Chautauqua experience. It would be difficult indeed to separate Harper's contributions to Chautauqua from those of other leaders of the time since the ideas of individuals often lose their identity once they enter the public domain.

One influence on education which could easily be overlooked is related to the tent chautauquas. The mainstay of these events was the inspirational lecture and one of the most impressive of these was Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds," in which the speaker expounded upon the idea that one could find riches in his own back yard. Conwell should have been a millionaire several times over, but he was often heard to say "...earn money; money is power; use that power for good" (Case & Case, 1948, p.68). He used a substantial portion

of his income to put countless young men through college and later founded and became president of Temple University.

The tent chautauqua circuit employed 6,000 college men per summer for its tent crews. These young men not only earned money for their tuition, but they also served as role models for those in small towns, thereby increasing college enrollments (Case & Case, 1948).

The circuit lasted for 50 years. It had been "...born into the age of bitterness and reconciliation, the age of industrial and social strife and expansion, that followed the Civil War" (Morrison, 1974, p.12). George Vincent, the co-founder's son and the second president of Chautauqua Institution, viewed Chautauqua as a place "...where people can retreat from the world only to meet the world again at another level, the level of discourse and understanding" (Morrison, p.196).

The decline of the chautauqua movement was influenced by many factors. Among these were improved roads and means of transportation, more newspapers and magazines, increased travel abroad, and finally the advent of radio, moving pictures, and television. Gould (1961) felt that the movement "...began to die when the great issues disappeared" (p.83). He also believed that those who managed the circuit lost sight of their mission in trying to reconcile their desires to bring culture to the masses and to make money.

The Chautauqua Institution still exists today, but perhaps more importantly, the legacy of the chautauqua movement lives on in our system of higher education. Correspondence schools, extension courses, summer terms, extracurricular activities, and the university press are all rooted in Chautauquan ideals. A very large debt is owed to John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller for their vision and for their enthusiasm in carrying it out.

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